

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

MOTOR VESSEL KITION

ALLISION WITH I-10 BRIDGE,

BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA,

FEBRUARY 10, 2007

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Docket No.: DCA-07-FM-013

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Interviews of: JAMES H. LeBLANC, JR.

U.S. Coast Guard
Marine Safety Unit
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Tuesday,
February 13, 2007

The above-captioned matter convened, pursuant to
notice.

BEFORE: LIAM LARUE

APPEARANCES:

LIAM LARUE
National Transportation Safety Board

BARRY STRAUCH, Human Resources Factors Specialist
National Transportation Safety Board

BILL WOODY
National Transportation Safety Board

CHIEF RAY BALL
U.S. Coast Guard

PETTY OFFICER ROBERT FEUS
U.S. Coast Guard

JOHN POLANSKY, JR.
Director of Engineering and Security
The Port of Greater Baton Rouge
2425 Ernest Wilson Drive
Port Allen, Louisiana

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I N T E R V I E W

MR. LeBLANC: And since 2004, I have been the Director of Operations. But for the majority of this time, my office was out on the dock, on dock number one, so we had visual action of what was going on out on the dock.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Is it okay if we record this?

Have we started recording this?

MR. LARUE: Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Mr. LeBlanc, is it okay with you if we record our interview?

MR. LeBLANC: Yes, that's fine.

INTERVIEW OF JAMES H. LeBLANC, JR.

BY MR. WOODY:

Q. Could you say your name so we can get the tape right?

Is your name James LeBlanc?

A. Yes. My name is James LeBlanc, Director of Operations for the Port of Greater Baton Rouge, Port Allen, Louisiana.

Q. Do you know the miles for the Port (indiscernible).

A. Pardon me?

Q. The miles that it covers?

A. Operations for the Port of Baton Rouge covers miles marker 168.5, which is the beginning of Ascension Parish to mile marker 253, the ending of the East Baton Rouge Parish on the Mississippi River.

1 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER #1: I'm sorry. What's that
2 last number, 253?

3 MR. LeBLANC: Yes, 253. River mile marker 253.

4 BY MR. WOODY:

5 Q. I think -- let's proceed here. You said you had your
6 office out on the dock. Just tell us what you observed.

7 A. Well, for some 19 years my office, as Assistant
8 Director of Operation was out on dock number one and we had an
9 opportunity to observe vessels coming in and going out. And
10 one of the things that we observed that when we had high water,
11 as we have now, that the vessel, rather than being spun around
12 at dock number two, they were pushed out from the dock, back
13 down the river, below the bridge, and then turned. Especially,
14 the larger vessels.

15 However, it should be noted that the largest vessels
16 that come to the Port of Baton Rouge, are usually the vessels
17 going to Apex Oil. They're the largest ones. And as soon as
18 she redo the forms, I can give you a list of all the vessels
19 that came to the Apex terminal within say the last three years.

20 BY CHIEF BALL:

21 Q. Mr. LeBlanc, you stated that during high water, what
22 does the Port of Baton Rouge or yourself consider to be high
23 water?

24 A. Normally, when you get into the 10 feet, 10 to 12
25 feet above sea level is what we call normal. Once that thing

1 gets into the 20s and the 30 feet above sea level -- as a
2 matter of fact, the Coast Guard puts special things into play
3 once it gets up to the 20 and the 30 feet level. But that is
4 when the river is flowing the fastest and that's when they take
5 all of the caution.

6 Q. The Corps does something at what, 12 on the Carrollton
7 gauge?

8 A. Yes, the 12 on the Carrollton gauge is reference to
9 about 28 to 30 up here in Baton Rouge --

10 Q. Of the Baton Rouge gauge here?

11 A. -- and that's when the action takes place.

12 Q. So that's the gauge that you're going, that you're
13 mainly basing this off of, is the Port of Baton Rouge?

14 MR. POLANSKY: Well, there's one there at the locks.
15 The Corps, in addition to you all's high water, they kick in
16 some other restrictions as far as working near levels and all
17 that.

18 CHIEF BALL: Oh, yes, of course. What I'm trying to
19 get at, John, is just my experience, my little experience being
20 here. There's so many gauges. Like high water down in New
21 Orleans might be like 10 or 12, where up here, it would be
22 around 26.

23 MR. POLANSKY: Up to 30.

24 BY CHIEF BALL:

25 Q. That's why I just wanted to confirm with both of you

1 gentlemen, that hey, what gauge are you basing this off of?

2 A. The Coast Guard based their on Carrollton gauge and
3 when it gets to 12. But usually when it's at 12 there, it's
4 about 20 to 30 here.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. So that's the difference.

7 Q. The Coast Guard in Baton Rouge, we go off, just
8 strictly off the Army Corps of Engineer. It just says Baton
9 Rouge gauge and we go off that one.

10 MR. POLANSKY: That's the one right here.

11 CHIEF BALL: Okay, so I just want to make sure that
12 we're all on the same page because you talk to other people
13 around in the industry and some of them might say, oh, high
14 water is at 25 feet. The Coast Guard says, because we start
15 adding at interest into it at 28 feet --

16 MR. POLANSKY: On the Baton Rouge.

17 CHIEF BALL: -- on the Baton Rouge gauge.

18 MR. LeBLANC: But it's based on the Carrollton gauge.
19 Twelve feet --

20 MR. POLANSKY: Yes, the Corps of Engineers
21 requirement.

22 MR. LeBLANC: Yes, and when it gets to 12 on that
23 gauge, then the Coast Guard starts sending out warnings,
24 telling us that this is going on and these are the things that
25 the different push boat and everything has got to have.

1 So the official thing is the 12 on the Carrollton
2 gauge down at the Guard because we are under the Captain of the
3 Corps, which is in New Orleans.

4 BY CHIEF BALL:

5 Q. Does, whenever the water gets, whenever we get to
6 high water, and you said that the Coast Guard sends out limits
7 and restrictions, do this, do that, is there any directions for
8 the Port of Baton Rouge to take? Do you guys have any like any
9 letters from the Coast Guard saying that, hey, at this level
10 water, do this, do that, or is it just knowing?

11 A. It's just knowing. We don't have any accidents
12 because we don't have any push boat in the river. We don't
13 have, you know, each vessel that comes up here has an agent and
14 they are the ones that must take all of these precautions.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. The Port of Baton Rouge is not involved in that
17 action whatsoever.

18 Q. Okay.

19 A. When they say that the Carrollton gauge is 12 and high
20 and you have to have so many horse power to push so many barges
21 and stuff like that, that does not affect us at all.

22 Q. Okay. How about extra long lines or anything like
23 that?

24 A. It will tell them that, it will tell the vessel agent
25 that when these vessels are coming in, if this water is this

1 high, you must do this, but it tells them, and they let us know
2 that they have been told.

3 Q. Okay. I just wanted to establish for the record
4 that, whenever it gets to high water, obviously, there's extra
5 steps to be taken. And also, I just want to establish what the
6 port of Baton Rouge or Mr. LeBlanc considers to be high water.

7 And that's all. I just wanted to do that for the record.

8 Also, Mr. LeBlanc, you said that large vessel, what
9 would you, or the Port of Baton Rouge consider to be a large
10 vessel?

11 MR. POLANSKY: 650, 700 and above.

12 MR. LeBLANC: Yes, 650.

13 MR. POLANSKY: Anything above the little
14 (indiscernible). The little 398, 400 foot (indiscernible)
15 boats --

16 CHIEF BALL: Okay, yes.

17 MR. POLANSKY: -- used to carry (indiscernible)
18 goods.

19 CHIEF BALL: Yes, I just wanted to establish once
20 again for the record, what does the Port consider to be large
21 vessels. In other ports, of course, 1,000 feet long.

22 MR. POLANSKY: Well, right now, it's anything bigger
23 than a barge.

24 MR. LeBLANC: Yes, get the print off --

25 MR. POLANSKY: Well, this is the last

1 (indiscernible).

2 CHIEF BALL: So, large vessels are considered to be
3 650 feet, roughly, or larger.

4 MR. POLANSKY: This (indiscernible) the captain
5 reports.

6 MR. LeBLANC: This is report that we get from the
7 captain.

8 BY CHIEF BALL:

9 Q. So what you're saying, Mr. LeBlanc, is that during
10 high water, okay? (Indiscernible) large vessels of 650 or
11 greater would normally, just come off the pier, back down --

12 A. Now, let's make sure we clear this up.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. I'm not sure that that is the pilot's regulation.
15 But I have noticed that in the past when high water is there,
16 that rather than spin that vessel around, they push it out,
17 back it up, and then spin it around.

18 Q. Okay.

19 A. I don't know if they have any SOP or anything else
20 that say they have to do that.

21 Q. Okay. Well, please understand, sir, the main reason
22 that why we're talking to you is for your expertise and for
23 your experience. So even if you say that, yes, almost
24 exclusively, we understand that. If they have something
25 different, we understand that. We just want to know, what

1 you've witnessed, what's your experience. Your experience with
2 large vessels.

3 A. Yes, that's my experience.

4 MR. POLANSKY: I have seen, when I've been out in our
5 boat, I've seen them pull up river a little ways, --

6 MR. LeBLANC: They do.

7 MR. POLANSKY: -- they make that turn. And you know,
8 they're well upstream from the bridge before they go back out.

9 BY CHIEF BALL:

10 Q. In both of your gentlemen's experience, in all the
11 years of your being here, how many times have you ever seen a
12 vessel that's 650 feet or greater just peel off, like the way
13 this one did?

14 A. Well, they've done it.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. You've had them going both ways.

17 Q. Okay.

18 A. Yes, they've done it.

19 MR. POLANSKY: I, personally, have only seen them go
20 up a little ways and make the turn. But again, the river was
21 at about eight, about elevation eight. It wasn't like it is
22 now.

23 MR. WOODY: Sir, state your name, please.

24 MR. POLANSKY: John Polansky.

25 MR. LARUE: And your title?

1 MR. POLANSKY: I'm the Director of Engineering and
2 Security.

3 MR. LARUE: P-O-L-A-N-S-K-I.

4 MR. POLANSKY: S-K-Y.

5 BY CHIEF BALL:

6 Q. Okay, but, the only time you've ever seen them peel
7 off like that was during like normal water or low water.
8 You've never seen a vessel, 650 feet or greater in length, to
9 peel off from the pier at such a high water stage.

10 A. I really wouldn't want to say that because again,
11 just as sure as I see that, he would have (indiscernible) when
12 he did it. And I'm not there when each of the vessels comes in
13 and leave. If I was there to witness every vessel, I would say
14 I never saw it or they never did it. But in a situation like
15 it is, I can't say.

16 But I do know that, in most cases when they have the
17 large vessels, you pull it out from the dock, push it
18 downstream, and then, just as John said, some of them go
19 upstream. And they do likewise with Exxon. Exxon, they come
20 from Exxon dock, comes down, get to that area, spin it around,
21 and take it out.

22 MR. POLANSKY: Yes, always or never. That's going to
23 be hard to state.

24 MR. LeBLANC: Yes, sure.

25 MR. POLANSKY: I've only been here four years. I've

1 personally, been in the river in our boat, and seen one come
2 off of it that should have gone up.

3 (Simultaneous conversation.)

4 BY CHIEF BALL:

5 Q. We're not going to go back through the records and
6 says come on, they've done it here, to here, to here. We're
7 just asking for your experience, like I said, your expertise
8 that you witness.

9 MR. POLANSKY: The majority of vessels that I've seen
10 have been below the bridge. They just make the turn and go.

11 MR. LeBLANC: I can tell you this, though. Up at
12 Apex, Mr. Lanier and his people up there, they could be more
13 precise as to how many vessels go straight up or whatever
14 because there is usually someone there for every vessel.

15 CHIEF BALL: Okay.

16 MR. LeBLANC: You know, so they could really get you
17 into the house on that.

18 MR. POLANSKY: All right. You've got Roger's number.

19 MR. LeBLANC: Yes, 383 --

20 MR. POLANSKY: Yes, I just --

21 MR. LeBLANC: Oh, you gave it to them already.

22 MR. POLANSKY: And Roger's retired Coast Guard, too.

23 MR. LeBLANC: Yes.

24 MR. POLANSKY: He speaks Coast Guard.

25 (Laughter.)

1 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: You had to go there, didn't
2 you?

3 MR. LeBLANC: He speaks Coast Guard language.

4 MR. POLANSKY: I've got a good friend who is retired
5 Coast Guard. I'm starting to learn some of it.

6 CHIEF BALL: It's a whole other world.

7 MR. POLANSKY: I get it confused with Marine, though.
8 They have words that you guys don't. You all have words --
9 lots of acronyms.

10 MR. LARUE: Okay, Barry, anything?

11 MR. STRAUCH: I have no questions. (Indiscernible).

12 MR. LARUE: Sure.

13 MR. LeBLANC: There's three of them. Okay, that's
14 what it is. Now, if you all want to, if you wall would like, I
15 gave you the length of that vessel and here we have from 2001,
16 2000, a vessel that came into Apex Oil.

17 CHIEF BALL: Okay.

18 MR. LeBLANC: And they don't have the length on it,
19 but I have the length on the computer of these vessels. These
20 are the vessels that came to Apex Oil. And --

21 MR. POLANSKY: The hauler's names would be in the
22 large registry --

23 MR. LeBLANC: (Indiscernible).

24 MR. WOODY: Mr. Lanier's first name is what?

25 MR. LeBLANC: Huh?

1 MR. WOODY: Mr. Lanier?

2 MR. LeBLANC: Roger.

3 MR. POLANSKY: Roger.

4 MR. STRAUCH: How big was this vessel?

5 MR. LARUE: 798 feet.

6 MR. LeBLANC: 798 feet.

7 BY MR. STRAUCH:

8 Q. In terms of your experience, how would you classify
9 this vessel in terms -- against the other vessels you've seen?

10 A. This is a large vessel.

11 Q. Is it among the largest vessels you have seen?

12 MR. POLANSKY: I think it would be up in that VLCC
13 carrier range, Very Large Crude Carrier range.

14 MR. LeBLANC: We have had vessels come to the dock
15 that was larger than that, but they were just lay berth en
16 route to Exxon. But, coming to this dock, that's right in the
17 line of the big ones.

18 BY MR. STRAUCH:

19 Q. So, this is among the biggest you've seen at this
20 particular dock. Based on what you've seen, in terms of
21 vessels leaving this dock, how would you have expected this
22 vessel to depart the dock?

23 A. I'm not qualified in that area. What was the river
24 stage? What day was that?

25 CHIEF BALL: It was 26.4 according to the Baton Rouge

1 gauge.

2 MR. LeBLANC: 26.4 and that is one of the largest
3 vessels that's been there. There is a few that's 801, but 797
4 and 801 is a small amount of difference, you know. And with
5 the river stage as high as it was, I would assume that they
6 would have taken out, backed it up, and turned it around.

7 But again, those pilots have their rules of
8 engagement and stuff like that, what they can and cannot do.

9 MR. STRAUCH: Sure.

10 MR. LeBLANC: And I'm certain that for this guy to
11 have done that, and he's Pilot number 38, which means he's been
12 here a while. This is not a new pilot, you know. The newer
13 pilots' numbers are in the hundreds, aren't they?

14 CHIEF BALL: That's normally how it goes, unless
15 somebody retires and gives that number to a newer pilot. We're
16 still working on that.

17 MR. LeBLANC: Uh-huh.

18 CHIEF BALL: So --

19 MR. LARUE: We're going to talk to them today, so
20 we'll find that out.

21 MR. LeBLANC: Okay.

22 CHIEF BALL: So sometimes you can't just go by the
23 number.

24 MR. LeBLANC: Okay.

25 CHIEF BALL: So, we'll have to see.

1 MR. LeBLANC: But I'm certain that with that bridge
2 there, because when I got here in '85, I got here in January
3 '85, in '84 a ship ran into that bridge. But it didn't come
4 from there, it came from the lower dock and somehow the gas or
5 something got stuck. And the guy was hollering and screaming,
6 and nothing was going right and he hit the pylon.

7 But, nothing has come close to that bridge from that
8 dock. And I've just got to assume that when they have those
9 bigger vessels there with higher water, they didn't turn them.

10 Another thing that's of importance, too, the channel
11 comes right in front of that dock. We have never had to dredge
12 that dock, not since I've been here.

13 MR. POLANSKY: Everything north of the bridge, you
14 can run along the dock and, you know, stand it and it's like a
15 hole right there.

16 MR. LeBLANC: The channel come right out from the
17 front of dock number two and then it start going back across
18 the river. And with the river high, you know, normally,
19 especially, if Apex brought a vessel and put it on that barge
20 dock up there, a tug boat has to stay there with it 24/7 to
21 make sure that it stays in there because of the current.

22 BY MR. STRAUCH:

23 Q. Now, what is it about the size of the vessel and the
24 height of the river that says that you would have expected him
25 to go further back?

1 A. Well, let's use this analogy. When you've got
2 something big and it starts moving, it costs, you have to have
3 more power to stop it. So that if you started that big vessel,
4 not only was it large, but it's loaded, and it starts going
5 out, and for some reason or another, it gets into that current,
6 those poor tugs --

7 INTERCOM: James?

8 MR. LeBLANC: -- has got -- send it to my voicemail,
9 please.

10 INTERCOM: Okay.

11 MR. LeBLANC: -- those tugs has got something to deal
12 with, especially with the water high. Because the higher the
13 water is, the faster the current. See, so that's, I don't know
14 how you all do that in --

15 MR. POLANSKY: Well, from an engineering standpoint,
16 there's a very crude calculation here. Forty feet of draught
17 at a 100 feet longer than a 700-foot vessel, that's 4,000
18 square feet under the water, times the force of that water,
19 it's substantial.

20 BY MR. STRAUCH:

21 Q. Now, we were talking earlier about the pilot number
22 and his experience. Would you expect only experienced pilots
23 would know, or any pilot in this area would know what you would
24 have expected this vessel to do?

25 A. My thought was that if it was an older pilot and they

1 had something in their SOP that would tell them how to handle
2 it, then they certainly would have known versus maybe a younger
3 pilot who would not have, nor have read it and scanned over it
4 and not paid that much attention to it. That's why I asked was
5 it an older pilot.

6 You would think that for those guys to have number
7 38, he would either have to be an awful old or awful young
8 pilot, because 38 is a low number. And from one of the older
9 guys that's been doing this for years, they know that this
10 river is tricky and it's got a lot of screen in it.

11 MR. POLANSKY: That's what they're out there for, to
12 give advice to the master, but it always falls back if the
13 master didn't do what he was recommended to do.

14 BY MR. STRAUCH:

15 Q. And you've been here, you said over 20 years?

16 A. Twenty-two years.

17 Q. Have you ever seen a vessel strike the bridge in the
18 time you've been here?

19 A. No, no.

20 Q. This is the first time it's happened?

21 A. First time.

22 Q. Okay. Have you ever seen a vessel this size,
23 yourself, in this high of water, leave the dock the way this
24 vessel did?

25 A. I have not personally seen it, no.

1 Q. Okay. Just, could you estimate, how many vessels
2 you've seen depart that dock, under these kinds of conditions?

3 A. Wow. See, what happened is, we, at dock number two,
4 we only use that dock now for vessels coming from Apex.
5 However, when we had cargo vessels coming from there, we had
6 cargo vessels two and three a month come and leaving from that
7 same dock. Because we had Gear Bulk and what was the other,
8 Gear Bulk and Star. Star had dock number one and Gear Bulk had
9 dock number two, and they had, a lot of their vessels were 650,
10 big vessels.

11 MR. POLANSKY: They were that standard kind of like
12 pattern like size. And we have the same ones in Lake Charles
13 at that point.

14 MR. LeBLANC: And they came in and out of there. I
15 mean, weekly.

16 MR. STRAUCH: So, it's fair to say, you've seen
17 hundreds of vessels depart the dock?

18 MR. LeBLANC: Yes.

19 MR. STRAUCH: And, John Polansky, if I could ask you,
20 have you ever seen a vessel that size leave the dock this way?

21 MR. POLANSKY: No, sir, no.

22 MR. STRAUCH: And about how many vessels do you think
23 you've seen leave the dock?

24 MR. POLANSKY: Two. I've only been here four years.
25 I'm just not out there too long.

1 MR. STRAUCH: Okay. I just want to confirm what dock
2 it was leaving from?

3 MR. LeBLANC: Dock number two.

4 MR. STRAUCH: Okay.

5 MR. LeBLANC: They do have two manifolds. There's
6 dock two and then there's the barge dock, the one up further.
7 But this one was at dock number two.

8 BY CHIEF BALL:

9 Q. And that was Apex's dock. Correct?

10 A. Well, Apex has a manifold at that dock, but that is
11 dock number two.

12 Q. Got you.

13 A. And the Apex and general cargo.

14 BY MR. STRAUCH:

15 Q. I have a question for you. If you had to estimate
16 the distance between the tip of your dock and that first, that
17 stanchion on the bridge, what's the distance, would you say?

18 A. I wouldn't have a clue.

19 MR. POLANSKY: That's about 300.

20 MR. LeBLANC: Yes, because we're responsible for
21 what, 200 feet?

22 MR. POLANSKY: Uh-huh.

23 MR. LeBLANC: It's probably.

24 MR. POLANSKY: I'd say 300 because I think it's about
25 a 1300 gap from our dock to the far pier. And it's a 1,000

1 foot main span on that bridge, I believe. You know, from the
2 big pier to the big pier, the main --

3 CHIEF BALL: Oh, I see --

4 (Simultaneous conversation.)

5 MR. STRAUCH: Does anybody else have any more
6 questions before we turn off the recording?

7 Mr. LeBlanc, Mr. Polansky, is there anything else you
8 want to say to us in our investigation before we end the
9 interview?

10 CHIEF BALL: That maybe might help or assist us?

11

12 MR. POLANSKY: We're here to help. We're all in this
13 together. You know, our livelihood depends on that river and
14 you know, it depends on I-10, too. You know, if you can't get
15 there from here, we're going to be out of business.

16 MR. STRAUCH: Well we want to, on behalf of the Coast
17 Guard and the NTSB, we want to thank you for your assistance.

18 MR. POLANSKY: Certainly.

19 (Whereupon, the interview in the above-entitled
20 matter was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: Motor Vessel Kition
 Allision With I-10 Bridge
 Baton Rouge, Louisiana
 February 10, 2007
 Interview of James H. LeBlanc, Jr.

DOCKET NUMBER: DCA-07-FM-013

PLACE: Baton Rouge, Louisiana

DATE: February 13, 2007

was held according to the record, and that this is the
original, complete, true and accurate transcript which has been
compared to the recording accomplished at the hearing.

Kimberly J. Zogby
Transcriber